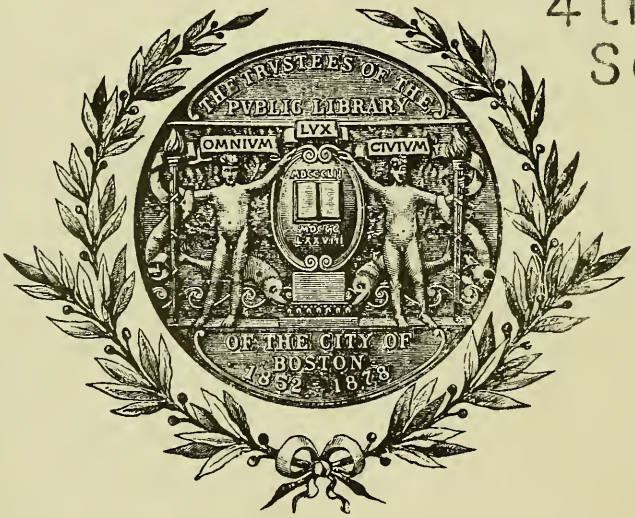
No. 7459.134
Nos. 85-113
4th
Ser.



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2010 with funding from
Boston Public Library

http://www.archive.org/details/whatworldwantsof00dole

FOURTH SERIES.] [No. 87.

WHAT THE WORLD WANTS OF US.

BY

REV. CHARLES F. DOLE.

AMERICAN UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION,

BOSTON.

"The object of the American Unitarian Association shall be to diffuse the knowledge and promote the interests of pure Christianity; and all Unitarian Christians shall be invited to unite and co-operate with it for that purpose." — ARTICLE I. *of the By-Laws of the American Unitarian Association.*

UNIVERSITY PRESS:
JOHN WILSON AND SON, CAMBRIDGE.

WHAT THE WORLD WANTS OF US.

I TAKE a familiar parable from the great chandelier in a church. It is made of many separate burners or lights. I can imagine these lights to be scattered about over a square mile of ground, so that looking from a little distance, you would scarcely know that they were there. Not one of them by itself would give brightness enough to see to read. But massed together, these separate lights can be seen from afar, and they fill the building.

I am apt to be appalled when I think of the littleness and insignificance of the individual life. The world is so big, there are so many people in it, things move on so vast a scale and with such aggregation of great populations, that it seems as if the life of any one of us, however large and good in itself, scarcely counted for anything. It seems even as though the lives of the great men of the past, which once, like famous ships, filled the narrow stream of human history, if they sailed by to-day, would soon appear like specks of sails upon the ocean. The solitary prophet or reformer could once attack an evil, an abuse, an injustice, and almost single-handed could hope to slay it. But the crying evils which afflict society to-day go by wholesale; they are involved in the warp and woof of universal society. A thousand individuals

may deplore the factory system, the tenement-house system, the sweating system, the new immigration of ignorance, the selfish and corrupt politics; but no individual is large or strong or wise enough by himself to change or check these systems, or stem the tide of selfish politics running with the momentum of accumulated millions of money.

On the other hand, we are daily impressed with the power and the helpfulness of combinations of individuals. What the one alone cannot do, a few banding together can accomplish as perhaps never before. If you want to do anything in this world, mass your power, mass your light, bring your little separate burners into a chandelier. This is the law and condition, if you wish your lives to count for all that there is in them. This is the law of business and success in it: mass your power and your capital. This is the law of reform: if you want to keep our government safe and pure, or to help do justice in a particular direction, as to the Indians, mass your influence, join hands and purses with the men who think with you.

This is also the law in religion. It might seem that all that the world needs is to see individual lives of faith and hope and charity. But the world does not begin to get on merely by the power of such scattered individual lives. The darkness of the world, its ignorance, its sins, its wretchedness, its poverty, its doubt and scepticism, simply absorb these scattered lights. The world wants in religion the sustained, concentrated power of the chandelier.

This is the idea of a church. The community wants light. It wants to be made perfectly sure where the great lines of life run. It wants to be assured that light, and not darkness, is the essential victorious power of this

universe. It wants not to doubt that justice and goodness reign in the skies and traverse the earth. It wants to believe that life at its hardest and sternest is yet amply and gloriously worth living. It wants to see, not Death, with its black jaws, waiting at the end of the road, but the gates of life standing open and making the face of Old Age shine with hope. The Church is set to meet this need of greater light. A hundred, five hundred, a thousand men and women, bring all the faith and hope and love that they know, and say to the world, See, here is light, here is goodness eternal, truth immutable, the shining ideals, the way to God! They say this very feebly, perhaps; there is some trouble with their light that makes it dim. But even these complaints are a tribute to the world's need of precisely the quality of light that a church is set to furnish.

Possibly some imagine that the need of churches is passing away with the changes of our civilization. I urge that the need of the concentrated light of religion was never so great in every branch of human life. So far from dispensing with churches and leaving religion to depend on individual impulses, we hold that the great call is for better churches and more concentrated power and light in them.

This brings me to say what I have specially in mind about the place of our Liberal churches in this eager, busy, restless, and hungering age. We happen to be challenged just now to answer what we are good for, or why the world should want us. I heard lately the words of such a challenge from a very thoughtful Harvard professor. "You Unitarians have done excellent and valuable work in the past," he said; "but what are you here for now? What message or gospel have you that men should look to you for further help?"

Let me show as plainly as possible what the Liberal churches stand for. A great crisis in morals and religion is upon us. There was never a greater or more profound crisis, or a time more thrilling to live in. The light of religion — what little there was in the world — has been commonly supposed, among Protestants, to shine from certain great and sacred candlesticks in the distant past. There was one luminous tract in human history. It was over the Hebrew land. It culminated in the life of Jesus. When Paul and Peter died, the original light ceased. What light the world had since was only by imperfect reflection, at best, from that great "star of Bethlehem." Where that particular star did not shine, no clear light about God or heaven could be. But this came to be meagre and negative to tell men. Further and more remote, as the centuries passed, grew this bright and beautiful light. Between the men of to-day and the life of Jesus intervened mists, obscuring what that life really was. "Look to Jesus!" the cry was; and, lo! as men looked, they did not see the real Jesus at all. And still the cry went, "Look to Jesus!" for else, except by reflection, you cannot have any light. We see men deliberately turning from the coming day, straining their eyes to get that distant light of the Hebrew story. We see multitudes tired and hopeless about it. They have not any light. They have thought that they once had it; but it has become obscure. "Does God care? Does God love? Is right at the heart of the universe? Is life, and not death, the end of our being?" men ask; but they have not the faith to answer, or even to trust. These are the men and women whom we can help.

We stand, first and foremost, for light, — for the getting and giving it. We stand for all the light that there is, and for the making of more. We have all that there is.

Light is not a commodity shut up in some corner, to which privileged persons only have the key. To hear some people talk, it would seem that we did not know what we believe! We believe in light — in all glorious examples, in all noble visions, in all beautiful lives, in all that reveals goodness, makes faith, deepens love, or quickens hope. We believe that light comes by reflection. It is precious always, say we. Gather it in your mirrors, and make it shine again. But we do not think that light comes only by reflection, as in the cold moon or a burnished surface. It comes originally: it leaps out of everything that is on fire. It develops out of life, and wherever real life is. It comes straight from God, and lighteneth every man that comes into the world.

We care a thousand-fold more for what we call the method of Jesus to produce light than we care even to see Jesus. We care to be filled with humanity and set ablaze with love by whatever touches us, whether it be that beautiful life far away or the face of a child in our home.

But others, you say, stand for this, too. We have no monopoly of light. Thank God, the more light, the better! We believe that there was never more faith and hope and love in our world than now. And is this a reason why we should give up our grand business of making the light shine, because others are doing the same? Did we not agree that the world is as yet, on the whole, very dark? Does any place exist where the people are not crying for the pure light of religion? Do not multitudes want faith and hope more than anything else?

But we are not doing precisely the same as others. Besides the great common mission, we have a distinct mission, too. There are ever so many things which have been mixed up with religion, and thought important to

religion, which the world to-day is finding it very hard to believe. Religion has been taught on the basis of miracles and ancient authority. Many question that authority. As we said before, if they must get their light by reflection alone, they are going without. We come to these people with a clear gospel. We say that religion holds good, — that faith, hope, love, are realities, whatever you think about the old basis of authority. The light is the fact, not the form of the lamp or the frame that supports it, or the particular variety of oil that makes it. Thus we are perfectly free of the questions about the authority of religion which perplex so many. If any one has a doubt about light and what it is and where it comes from, we have only to say to him, Look at it, use it, enjoy it, and doubt not that it comes "from the Father of Lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning."

It is here that I make my appeal to you. The world is as yet very slow to believe this beautiful and simple gospel. Almost all the religion that the world has ever seen has been associated with certain ancient forms and with the men who held these forms. All the churches have had opaque and colored shades over their lamps. They have taught men that the light would not shine if you discarded these shades. The world has not really seen clear light without the shades. Many do not believe that light can be made to shine long if you take the shades off. What they want more than anything else is not argument to prove what you say, but object-lessons to assure them of the fact.

We have already plenty of private and individual object-lessons of this. It is wonderful how many persons are to-day working out beautiful lives, deeply religious, as the prophets worked them out, as Jesus did, without any use whatever of the customary shades

of tradition and authority. But these scattered individual lives of religious men and women, whose light shines free of dogma and doubtful traditions, do not begin to meet the needs of our age. You point to Mr. Emerson's life or Theodore Parker's, and men shake their heads, and they say that such a life is exceptional. It could not have got its light except by reflection. It was a sort of product, they say, of the old traditional religion. You cannot have a church on the simple basis of Emerson. If you depend on so simple a religion, the next generation will be plunged into darkness. This is exactly what men are saying.

And yet all thoughtful persons have a suspicion to-day that unless we can organize religion and make our faith shine on just that simple basis, and quite free of the old opaque shades, the next generation cannot have any religion that will satisfy its needs. These opaque shades are growing intolerable. Men are wishing — we talk with such in other churches — that the world could bring up its children to a simple faith in God, that the world could keep its wonderful hope of a life eternal, on the simple grounds upon which individuals among us already hold their faith and keep their hope bright.

Men look around for adequate object-lessons to give them such public assurance. They want your light strong, not dim. They want it steady, as though it were not going out, or else they will go back and get such light as they can through the old traditional shades that they do not believe in.

It is here that we have not begun yet to see our opportunity. We have not acted as if we had anything that the world wanted. We have not thought that we existed except for ourselves. I submit to you that the world needs clearly to know, what many now hold in doubt, that

we believe in religion; that our churches are alive, and not dead; that our people are loyal, not indifferent; that a Liberal church can be a growing church, an earnest church, a hospitable church; that a Liberal church can be full, and not empty; that its people can sing together, and work together, too, as all hearty and whole-souled and happy people always do sing and work.

There is not a member of an Orthodox church about us who, in his heart of hearts, would not like to see a church succeed on our basis, would not like to be convinced that the light of God is around us to-day as really as it was in Palestine ages ago. Show it to us! men cry. Where are the churches that stand for this? Where is their blazing chandelier?

And right here I wish to speak to our young people and children. The world is judging our religion by you. Can the simple religion keep its children? men ask. Will its young men and women be loyal to it? Will they do anything for it? Do they believe in it?

I will tell you what men are actually saying about you. They say that the children of a Liberal church are apt to desert it: few of them are there on a Sunday; the boys leave its Sunday-school, where no men stay to command their respect; its young men, riding bicycles across country, do their best to break down the institutions of the past, thoughtless of setting up anything better. It is said that the young people of the Liberal church are worldly and mercenary. It is said that we cannot recruit our own ministry from them.

This impression about our children frightens people who want to believe in the beautiful, simple religion. You children could do more to make the true light shine, to disabuse prejudice, to help men believe in a good God, than all the sermons preached from our pulpits in the last

fifty years. Let us train youth to be depended upon to stand in that place or march to that post, wherever they can do the most good. Let such young people stand together, as some even now wish to stand, resolved to make their church a success, their chandelier the mightiest light in the place! You have no idea what such a light as this would do for religion in America. One such church as this would kindle the light of another, and the blaze would go through the land. People would tell of it in the West and the South. "Yes," they would say, "the religion has come that thoughtful men can believe in, free of dogma, that fears no questions, that meets doubts. The religion of pure faith, hope, love, is a reality." "And the children stand by it, support it, believe in it?" "Yes, very heartily." Ah! then the religion of the generations to come is secure. Then faith in light and good and heaven shall rule the coming world. Would to God we might live to see such a church in every town!

I speak quite free of mere personal feeling. But I am impressed with the sense that we and our children are not only in danger of losing our clear sight of the great and ideal things for ourselves, but of actually obscuring these things for others. As though when men were asking the question, "Will the new and freer life of religion hold good?" we were understood to be answering, "No."

If I could make you see in some measure what our chance is, what is asked of us, what the need is that we have to meet, I believe that we should have a new access of power. I believe that hardly one of our men would be as much as tempted to choose the Sunday paper in place of his church. I believe that you would tell others of the high things that we here consider, and bring your friends and neighbors with you, and especially your children, till your church was full. We should not ask anything — the

giving of money or time or labor, for charity or reform or education or the spread of religion, in our city or elsewhere — in vain. I believe that all our young men and women would come into our Bible classes, eager to learn the noblest religious thought of our age. I believe that our Young People's Clubs would rise to a new type of life and effort, not less social, but more thoughtful and earnest. I believe that our churches would become great, strong, helpful centres of the higher life of man, in whose range no doubt of God or man or duty or truth or love would be possible.

I wish to make it plain that the church is for more than yourselves. I wish to appeal, not to your selfishness or your regard for individual culture, but to your generosity and your humanity. The Church is the great chandelier made up of the lamps of all of us, that men may see to read the meanings of life. We owe it to the dark world to make this light clear and bright. We owe our little individual burners for the sake of the whole. We owe this, as all other men owe it who care for the vast destinies of mankind. We owe it especially as those who are working out a bold, beautiful, and necessary experiment in the direction of a simple religion, at a time when all need to see our light blaze, while few believe yet that it can blaze and endure. We say that it can. Let us show that it can. Let us be a church to make men believe, and not doubt, our religion.

BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY
3 9999 06435 133 9